



## THE WORKING LIFE OF A WAITRESS

Several years ago, I sat down at my mother's kitchen table with a tape recorder and began a series of interviews with her about her work. She had not been able to do any kind of physical work for quite some time, six or seven years, and in the last one or two had gotten very ill, increasingly limited in what she could do. These interviews became the occasion, then, for the two of us to reminisce about her work in the restaurant and for her to tell me, in as much detail as she could summon, about the way she executed it. We talked about the relationships among boss, cook, and waitress; about the importance of regular customers; about her motives for working and what—in addition to income—she got out of it; about the physical punishment of waiting on tables; about the complex emotional field of the restaurant.

I was particularly curious about the thinking involved in doing a waitress's work well. How did she remember all those orders? How did she organize the many tasks that emerged minute by minute? How did she decide what to do first? How, in fact, did she learn how to do these things? As we talked, she would use the kitchen table, cluttered with pill bottles and letters, as an imaginary four-top. She and I would sketch out the floor plan or counter space of Norm's or of Coffee Dan's. She would get up, steadying herself on the back of my chair, and demonstrate how she placed all those plates along her arm. Her memory for the particulars appeared sharp, and her demonstrations were precise. There were times now, the mornings

especially, when she seemed so frail and not altogether there—in addition to her weakness, her many medications made her *stonato*, out of sorts, foggy—but the talk about her life in the restaurant vitalized her, a reliving of lost capacity, bittersweet, but sure in its knowledge. She had done this work for over thirty-five years.

Since the interviews with my mother, I have observed and interviewed six other waitresses, from a range of restaurants, using a similar set of questions. I've also been reading whatever popular and scholarly literature I could find on waitressing: from journalistic accounts and training material written in the 1920s and 1930s, to labor histories, to sociological research on the social and emotional dimensions of waitressing, to a handful of cognitive psychological studies of the memory capacity of waiters and waitresses. In synthesizing these interviews and literature, I found correspondence with my mother's account as well as some interesting points of divergence, which I pursued with further interviews or reading, using one source of information to open up the other.

With the exception of those psychological studies of memory, most of what has been written about waitressing focuses on the social aspects of the work—admittedly a vivid story. And, interestingly, as waitress unions developed through the last century and sought to define their occupation, they did so—reflecting the times—primarily in terms of its social abilities, nurturing and caring. What I came to appreciate, though, was the significance of the waitress's ability to process information, to think on her feet. There is the perception in both policy circles and the public mind that waitress work involves little intelligence and is among, in one writer's words, "the least skilled lower class occupations." Gender bias is likely at play here; occupations populated by women have historically been seen as requiring less intelligence. But I think there is something else going on—not unrelated to gender, or to class—and it applies to a lot of service work. The intelligence of the

work, the thought that makes it possible, is so embedded in social interaction, routines of service, and emotional dynamics that it goes unacknowledged. The skill of the work, as labor historian Dorothy Sue Cobble puts it, is "rendered invisible." What follows, then, is both an homage to a particular waitress and an attempt to represent the intersecting cognitive and social demands of the work itself.



One of the truest things I know about my mother and her work in the restaurant is how central that work was to her sense of self and engagement with the world. What I also know from our shared experience is that her choice of work and the meaning she ascribed to it was shaped by the course of her own life history and the web of social and economic forces surrounding it. My mother didn't choose or execute her work in a vacuum—none of us do. Let me begin, then, with a brief overview of my mother's working life—a life initially defined by the immigrant experience, poverty, and the Great Depression.

Rose Emily Meraglio came to the United States from southern Italy as a little girl in the early 1920s and settled with her family in Altoona, Pennsylvania. Her father worked as a laborer for the Pennsylvania Railroad (and would eventually leave the yards disabled). Her mother raised seven children, took in boarders, made illegal wine and beer, and did whatever else she could to enable the family to survive. Rose was taken out of school in the seventh grade to help raise her three younger brothers and to assist with the tending of the boarders: cooking, cleaning, laundering. She did this work well into her teens, eventually taking a job in a garment factory and, briefly, in a local Italian restaurant, a job that wouldn't last, for "not a soul came in there." This early work at home and beyond was surrounded by profound economic need—and a sense

of financial vulnerability would remain with my mother for the rest of her life.

The next phase of my mother's economic history came with her marriage to my father, Tommy Rose: the two opened and ran an Italian restaurant in downtown Altoona, open twenty-four hours a day to cater to the round-the-clock schedule of the Pennsylvania Railroad, the core of the city's economy. Self-described as a "raggedy" and "shy" girl, Rose developed quickly from private household labors and routinized factory work to a young woman in a public role, laden with new, often unpredictable, responsibilities: from cooking, hiring help, and ordering supplies to hostessing, waiting on tables, and tending the register. She would sometimes work fifteen to seventeen hours a day, for she had to remedy whatever mishaps arose. Here's a not atypical entry in a daily journal she kept during those years:

*Mrs. Berner walked out on account of Mrs. Kauffman. So here I am alone cooking. June didn't show up either . . . I'm so tired.*

But along with the accounts of exhaustion and anxiety, there is also testament to the fulfillment this new life brought:

*On this day, I'm two years in business. I love it.*

For all its tribulations, the restaurant contrasted with the lonely oppressiveness of her earlier labors, provided the conditions to gain knowledge about the restaurant business through immersion in it, and enabled my mother to learn how to "be with the public."

Though financially uneven, the restaurant did well enough through World War II and just after. But as the Pennsylvania Railroad—along with the railroad industry generally—began its first stage of decline, closing shops, laying people off (my uncle Frank among them), the Rose Spaghetti House failed, ending in bankruptcy. This was 1951. Over the next year, my parents would

move to Los Angeles in search of opportunity and a warmer climate for my father, whose health was failing. They had little money and no connections whatsoever; friends and family were twenty-five hundred miles away, a lament I often heard. I was seven. My father couldn't work. So my mother went in search of the kind of work her limited formal education and her experience with the restaurant made possible, work she would continue until 1979, when illness forced her into retirement at sixty-four.

At first she waitressed in a series of coffee shops in downtown L.A., the largest stretch at Coffee Dan's on heavily trafficked Broadway. Then she moved to Norm's, a "family-style" chain, working for nearly a decade at the shop on Sunset and Vermont, by major medical facilities and corporate offices, like that for Prudential. She spent her last ten years at the Norm's in Torrance, amid a more lower-middle class, local merchant, and retirement clientele. During her time at Coffee Dan's and Norm's Sunset, my father would slip into grave illness and, for the last years of his life, be bedridden. I proceeded through elementary and high school. Mustering what immediate help she could, she struggled to balance work, caretaking, and child rearing. This period, roughly from 1952 to the early sixties, was another period of severe hardship. As my mother put it simply: "Dad was ill, and you were little. . . . I *had* to get work."

My father died in 1961. Eventually my mother would meet and marry a man who was a truck driver with the city, a job with stable wages and benefits. They bought a house in Torrance—a nicer house and safer—and she began her final ten years of waitressing at the Norm's nearby. This was a decade of economically better times. Even after she had to quit waitressing, my stepfather's employment carried them through comfortably. But my mother's inactivity during these early years of her retirement brings to the fore the centrality of physical work to her sense of who she is. For all



the strain of waitressing, the work provided her with a way to feel useful, to engage her mind, and to be in the flow of things. When in the mid-1980s a neighbor got her a job as a noon aide at a local elementary school, she was revitalized. Her primary responsibility was to seat children for lunch and assist in clearing their tables. The job provided a few hours of minimum wage and, of course, no tips—it was barely a postscript to her economic life—but it held great value for her because of its mix of utility and nurturance. And it thrust her back into life's hustle. And it called on some of her waitressing skills. Though work for my mother was always driven by economic need, it was driven by a blend of other needs as well: cognitive, social, existential.

With this biography as backdrop, let me begin analyzing the work my mother did. Each of the restaurants that employed her had its own character and history, of course, but there are certain regularities to them—and to the many thousands like them—that can be abstracted and can help us understand the particular demands of waitressing.



On the face of it, a restaurant is a structured environment. The physical layout guides movement and behavior, and the various conventions associated with dining out are well known, to customer and waitress alike. But when analyzed in terms of the interrelated demands of the work itself, the environment, particularly at peak hours, becomes more complex, with an unpredictable quality to it.

Consider the restaurant in terms of multiple streams of time and motion. Customers enter with expectations: they will be seated without much delay and, once seated, a series of events will unfold along a familiar time line, from ordering through salad, entrée,

dessert, delivery of the check. Their satisfaction—physical and emotional—is affected by the manner in which these expectations are met. But customers are entering the restaurant at different times, each with his or her own schedule, so tables (or places at the counter) proceed through meals at different paces. This staggering of customers facilitates the flow of trade but also increases the cognitive demands on the waitress: what she must attend to, keep in mind, prioritize. This situation intensifies during peak hours, for the number of customers expected can be estimated, but not known—coffee shops and family-style restaurants typically do not take reservations. If the numbers swell beyond capacity or an employee calls in sick or is late or quits, then, as the younger waitresses I interviewed vividly put it, you're "slammed," abruptly pushed to the limits of physical and mental performance.

Another timetable kicks in as soon as an order is placed with the cook. Different items have different prep times, and once the item is prepared, there is a limited amount of time—pretty restricted for hot items—during which it can be served. As well, the serving area needs to be cleared quickly so that the cook can deliver further items. The waitress, therefore, is aware of the kitchen as she moves among her customers.

Both waitress and management work by the clock. Profit is related to time; the quicker the turnover, the more revenue for the owner—and the greater the number of tips. There can be exceptions to this principle for the waitress—but not the management—for example, the regulars who may hold a table or stool longer but tip more. Still, generally, the waitress, like her manager, is ever mindful of clearing a plate, closing out a tab, moving the process along.

Imagine these streams of time and motion as co-occurring and related but not synchronous. Any given customer may hem and

haw over an order, or want a refill while the waitress is occupied, or send an item back. The cook may deliver a waitress's hot dish while she is in the middle of taking an order and is being summoned by two other customers. Tables may be filled with variously contented customers while the manager feels the press of new customers gathering inside the door.

One more observation about this environment. No matter how efficiently designed the physical layout of the restaurant—let's say that coffeepots, water, soft drinks, cups, glasses, and ice are all located in the same area—the waitress's motion will be punctuated by the continual but irregular demands made of her. For example, all requests for coffee do not come at the same time or in regular intervals. So one request comes during an order, and another as she's rushing back to get extra mayonnaise, and another as she's clearing a table. The waitress must learn how to move efficiently through a vibrant environment that, for all its structural regularities, is dynamically irregular. A basic goal, then, is to manage irregularity and create an economy of movement. And she does this through effective use of body and mind. The work calls for strength and stamina; for memory capacity and strategy; for heightened attention, both to overall layout and to specific areas and items; for the ability to take stock, prioritize tasks, cluster them, and make decisions on the fly. I'll consider each of these qualities in further detail, beginning with physical prowess.

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What bodily skill does a waitress need? She must be able to balance and carry multiple items, using the hand, forearm, and biceps, creating stability by locking arms to torso and positioning the back. Then she moves, fast, in bursts, navigating tables, customers, other help. And since this occurs in a public space, it must be done with

a certain poise. As waitress and writer Lin Rolens nicely puts it: "You learn a walk that gets you places quickly without looking like you are running. . . . This requires developing a walk that is all business from the waist down, but looks fairly relaxed from the waist up." With time and practice, all this becomes routine, automatic. But early in a career, the waitress will undoubtedly be conscious of various aspects of this physical performance, have to think about it, monitor herself.

My mother gets up slowly from the kitchen table and walks over to the sink where plates are drying on a rack. She demonstrates. She turns her right hand palm up, creating a wider surface on her forearm, and begins placing plates, large and small, from biceps to fingertips, layering them so that the bottom of one plate rests on the edge of another. "You don't dare let a plate touch the food," she explains, "and it's got to be balanced, steady." Then with her left hand, she lays out two coffee cups and two saucers. She kind of pinches the saucers between her fingers and slips her index finger through the handles of the two cups. "The coffee splashes from one side to another if you're not careful. It takes practice. You just can't do it all at one time."

I ask her, then, how she learned to do it. Beginning with her own restaurant, "you watch the other waitresses, what they do." She was "cautious" at first, starting with two plates, being deliberate. Then she began adding plates, responding to the demands of the faster pace of the restaurants in Los Angeles. "Norm's was much busier. So you had to stack as many plates as you possibly could." And, with continued practice in these busy settings, you get to where "you don't even have to think about it." I'm struck by the similarity between my mother's description and the studies I've read on the role of cognition in the development of athletic skill. My mother mixed observation and practice, got some pointers

from coworkers, tricks of the trade, monitored her performance, and developed competence. As she achieved mastery, her mind was cleared for other tasks—such as remembering orders.



To be a good waitress, my mother says emphatically, “you have to have one hell of a good memory.” Her observation is supported by a small body of psychological research demonstrating that the competent waiter and waitress have techniques that enable them to override the normal limits on human “short-term” or “working” memory. Though there are some differences in the results of the studies, they point to four commonalities: The waiter and waitress know things about food and drink—ingredients, appearance, typical combinations—and this knowledge from “long-term” memory plays continually into their ability to remember orders. Furthermore, they have developed various visual, spatial, and linguistic techniques to aid memory: abbreviating items, grouping them in categories, repeating orders, utilizing customer appearance and location. The routines and physical layout of the restaurant also contribute to remembering orders. And, finally, though not strictly a characteristic of memory—as defined and studied in the psychologist’s laboratory—the waiter’s and waitress’s memory is profoundly goal-directed: to make their work efficient and to enhance their tips. My mother attests to each of these elements.

As she stood before a table, taking orders, sometimes repeating them back while writing them out, sometimes not, making small talk, my mother would “more or less make a picture in my mind” of the person giving her the order, what that person ordered, and where around a table (or at a counter) he or she was located. Though, surely, there was variation in the way my mother did this, her picture could include dress and physical appearance: items of clothing—a red blouse, a splashy tie—and physical features like a

birthmark or an unusually shaped nose. Broad social markers such as gender, race, age, body type, and weight also aided in memorization. (“Of course, a child’s plate, you can always tell” where that will go, my mother laughingly notes.) My mother’s beliefs and biases about these markers could play into the construction of the picture.

The layout of the tables (or the stools at the counter) and people’s location at them enabled my mother to store and recall information about orders in a number of ways. A customer’s specific position (by the window or closest to her) mattered, especially if it were somehow unusual—let’s say that a woman pulls a fifth chair to the edge of a four-top. Relative location also figures in, aided by other characteristics of the person or the order. My mother and I are sitting at the kitchen table, which she uses to illustrate: “The one sitting at the [fifth] chair, she ordered this, *this* is what she ordered, and the next person over [my mother points to the next chair clockwise], that’s another lady, and *that’s* what she wants.” Notice that my mother seems to perform some basic cognitive operations on the spatial information, something noted in the studies of waiters and waitresses. She mentions deviation, sequence, similarity, and contrast. Again, my mother points to an imaginary customer at our table: “I remember, he ordered the hamburger [she moves her gaze to the next chair], but she didn’t want a hamburger, she wanted something else.” So specific location as well as overall configuration matters.

Sometimes, it’s a social expectation that is salient and an aid to memory. For example, cocktail waitresses make distinctions between the drinks men and women typically order, and other waitresses I interviewed spoke of these gender distinctions as well. My mother describes a couple ordering. The man orders a T-bone steak, and the woman “would order something smaller, so naturally you’re gonna remember that.” And if an order violates expectation—



the woman orders the steak, the man a chef's salad—that will stand out, the memorable deviation.

Some items and the routines associated with them enable the use of external memory aids. My mother describes a six-top at breakfast with orders of ham and eggs, steak and eggs, and hotcakes. As soon as she takes the order she, as a part of her route to the kitchen and back to other tables, sets a little container of syrup in front of the customer who ordered hotcakes. The aid is particularly helpful in a situation like this because “a six-top is especially hard, and sometimes you have to ask the customers who gets what.” The container of syrup, then, lightens the load by one item.

Finally, a customer's attitude, the way he or she interacts with the waitress, contributes to her recall of the order. My mother comments on “how a customer would say something—you remember this dish is on the second table because so and so acted this way.” She especially notes if “somebody is giving me a rough time.” Of course, a particularly abrasive customer would stick in one's mind, but this raises an interesting broader issue: the way one's personal history and social position, the *feelings* related to these, play into cognition on the job.

One of the things that strikes me about my mother's report is the number of techniques it contains, the mix of strategies and processes: *imagistic*, spatial, verbal, and the role of emotion. Such complexity seems necessary when one is hurriedly tending to seven to nine tables, with two to six people at each. As my mother puts it: “Even though you're very busy, you're *extremely* busy . . . you're still, in your mind, you have a picture . . . you use all these [strategies], and one thing triggers something else.” The strategies are interactive and complementary, and they enable us to get a sense of how much and what kind of work is going on in the working memory of a waitress during peak hours in a family-style restaurant.



Remembering an array of orders, then, takes place in a rush of activity that demands attention to the environment, organizing and sequencing tasks that emerge in the stream of that activity, and occasional problem solving on the fly. My mother's interviews contain more than ten references to the pace and conflicting demands of waitressing. She describes a setting where an obnoxious regular is tapping the side of his coffee cup with a spoon while she is taking an order. The cook rings her bell indicating another order is ready, and a few seconds later the manager seats two new parties at two of her tables that have just cleared. And, oh, as she is rushing back to the kitchen, one customer asks to modify an order, another signals for more coffee, and a third requests a new fork to replace one dropped on the floor. “Your mind is going so fast,” she says, “thinking what to do first, where to go first . . . which is the best thing to do . . . which is the quickest.” She is describing multiple demands on cognition—and the challenge is not a purely cognitive one.

There is a powerful affective component to all this, one with economic consequences. The requests made of the waitress have emotional weight to them. Customers get grumpy, dissatisfied if they have to wait too long or if their request is bungled or forgotten. The relationship with the cook is fraught with tension—orders need to be picked up quickly and returns handled diplomatically—and the manager is continually urging the movement of customers through a waitress's station. As my mother puts it, you attend to your orders or “the cook will yell at you”; you try to get customers their checks quickly, “because you'll get hell from the manager.” The waitress's assessment of the emotional—blended with the economic—consequences of her decisions and actions plays back into the way she thinks through the demands of the moment.

One more thing. Depending on the restaurant, the flow of work can be facilitated (or impeded) by the arrangements and negotiations, mostly informal, made among the waitresses themselves and among the waitresses and those who bus the tables. These negotiations involve, at the least, the clearing of plates and glassware, assisting each other at rush hour, compensating for absent staff, and transitioning between shifts.

What do we know about the cognitive processes the waitress uses to bring some control to these multiple and conflicting demands? A good place to begin is with the psychological research on attention.

Attention is described in terms of its selectivity, a focusing on particular aspects of the environment; of the sustaining of that selective focus, a concentration as well as a vigilance for similar anticipated events or objects; and of the ability to control and coordinate the focus. In expert performance, these processes may become more refined and automatic. As one researcher puts it, attention serves "the purpose of allowing for and maintaining goal-directed behavior in the face of multiple, competing distractions."

There are periods in the waitress's day, lulls in activity, when she can stop and survey her station. My mother talks about a pause, standing back where she can "keep an eye on the register and all the way down the counter." But often the waitress is attending to things while on the move. Every waitress I interviewed commented on the necessity of attending in transit to requests, empty cups, plates moved to the edge of the table. As one waitress explained: "As you walk, every time you cross the restaurant, you're never doing just a single task. You're always looking at the big picture and picking up things along the way." This calls for a certain combination of motor skill and vigilance, captured in this passage where my mother describes her peripheral attention as she's delivering an order:

You look straight ahead to where you're going to take your food. You can't just look completely to the side, carrying all those plates—you could lose your sense of balance. As you're going out of the kitchen, you more or less take little glances to the side.

This vigilance—from a stationary point or while in motion—is not only a matter of perceptual acuity but also involves working memory and knowledge of the restaurant, knowledge of food preparation and of typical routines. My mother reveals this mix of memory, knowledge, and attention in her monitoring of the status of her customers' orders: "You're keeping an eye on who is not served yet. If it's been too long, you go check on the kitchen yourself." She recalls who ordered what and when and knows roughly how long a specific item should take to prepare, given the time of day. As she quickly checks her tables, she's attuned to a possible error in preparation.

Cognitive scientist David LaBerge uses *mindfulness* as a synonym for *attention*, and though the dictionary defines mindfulness somewhat sparsely as being aware or heedful, the word connotes something more, something that, I think, suits this discussion of waitressing and attention. Mindfulness, first of all, implies intelligence, a mind knowledgeable and alert. The word also connotes a heightened state and a comprehensiveness, an apprehension of the "big picture," mentioned earlier, and, as well, a cueing toward particulars, and a vigilance for aberration—as when my mother monitors those delayed orders.

I want to return to that harried moment my mother describes where the regular is tapping his coffee cup, the cook is ringing the bell, and so on. A waitress could attend to all this clatter, and know what it means, and yet not know what to do next. How does she decide what her next move should be?

The answer is a multilayered one and involves some of what



we've already seen. First, the waitress's response will be driven by several interrelated high-level goals: to satisfy customers (and thus boost income), to maximize efficiency and minimize effort, and to manage conflict. All the waitresses I interviewed referred in some way to this cluster of goals. My mother speaks of "making every move count" and how "you think quick what you have to do first . . . in order to please people." Another waitress asks, "How can I maximize my effort in that moment?" Yet another emphasizes the value of controlling fatigue by "working smart." These goals will serve to organize the waitress's activity.

Second, the waitress's response is shaped by various kinds of knowledge of the restaurant: knowledge of the menu, of preparation times, of the layout of the place. Included here is a knowledge of emotional dynamics, both a folk psychology about dining out and the characteristics of particular customers. My mother, twenty years after retirement, can recount the quirks and traits of her regulars. As one veteran waitress puts it: "Everybody has their own personality. That's another level of learning . . . you've got to learn this way of working with people."

Third, the high-level goals and knowledge of the restaurant give rise to more specific action rules—waitressing rules of thumb—that, depending on the context, could aid in sequencing one's response. All the waitresses I interviewed, for example, mention the importance of attending to—even if just to acknowledge—newly seated customers. ("The big part of this business is not to ignore anybody.") They also stress the importance of picking up orders—especially hot ones—quickly. Another rule of thumb, applicable during rush hour, is to tally and deliver checks in a timely manner. And yet another is to consider the emotional consequences of action—which calls for an ongoing assessment of character and feeling. Is the cook especially touchy today? Do you have a particularly demanding customer? My mother expresses this emotional

calculus when she advises "use your own mind and ask [of yourself] which customer will complain and which won't." Given an environment of multiple demands, these rules of thumb could guide one, for example, to attend to a new customer and serve a hot order—and forestall the circuit through the station to refill coffee. Refills would, in the moment, move lower in priority.

What is striking, though, is the degree to which the expert waitress relies on a broad strategy that makes many either-or decisions moot. And this brings us to the fourth element in the waitress's response to multiple demands. She organizes tasks by type or location. She combines tasks in ways that greatly economize movement, that make activity, in my mother's words, "smooth." As one waitress puts it, she is always asking "which pieces of what I need to do fit together best." Though some prioritizing of tasks—guided by rules of thumb—does occur, the more common move (noted as a mark of experience by several of the waitresses) is to quickly see what tasks can be grouped and executed with least effort.

This leads to a fifth characteristic: the way restaurant routines aid in this organizing of tasks. My mother and the other waitresses I interviewed all refer in some way to a circuit through one's station that is watchful and that takes advantage of the restaurant's physical layout. As one waitress explains it:

I always think of it as kind of a circle, because there's the tables, there's the bar, there's the coffee station, and it kind of becomes a flow of organizing what can be in one full circle, how many tasks can be accomplished, as opposed to back and forth, back and forth. I think the waitresses who get going back and forth are the ones who get crazy with four tables.

This description resonates with the earlier discussion of attention—the blend of anticipation, vigilance, and motor skill—but in a way

that underscores the dynamic interaction of the waitress's ability and the structure and conventions of the restaurant.

Perhaps the thing that most impressed me in all this—and it emerged in every interview—is the claim the waitresses made that they work best when the restaurant is busy. On the face of it, this doesn't make sense. I would imagine that one could remember three or four orders with more accuracy than six or seven, that one could handle refills easier with a half-full station. These numbers would result in a more relaxed pace but, the waitresses claim, not in more skillful performance. In fact, my mother insists she could never have developed her level of skill in slower restaurants. "You're not as alert . . . not thinking that quick"; you're not anticipating orders; "you're making a couple of trips" rather than a single efficient one. "In a slow place, you think slower." One waitress notes the feeling of working "like a well-oiled machine" during rush hour. Another says that "when it gets the craziest, that's when I turn on. I'm even better than when it's dead."

Of course, increased volume of trade can lead to disaster as well—if, for example, a waitress calls in sick or a critical piece of equipment fails. Every waitress tells those horror stories. But it seems that, barring the unusual mishap, the busy restaurant can lead to maximum performance. One's physiology responds—my mother talks about her "adrenaline going faster"—and there is a heightened readiness and reaction. And the increased flow of trade itself provides a variety of demands that call forth, that require the skillful response, the necessary fluid integration of attending, memory, organization of tasks, and strategic use of routine. This is not to deny the exhaustion, even the punishment, of the work, but it is telling how my mother and the other waitresses all comment on the satisfaction that they feel when they perform well under stress. Several use language similar to that of the currently celebrated "flow" experience, felt during those times when a person

responds successfully to significant challenges from the environment. "There's a sense of accomplishment in just the mechanics of it," says one waitress, "just knowing that . . . I'm handling it all."



Remembering orders, being vigilant, and regulating the flow of work all play out in an emotional field. "Eating is the most intimate act," writes Lin Rolens, "we are encouraged to perform in public." And Dorothy Sue Cobble, who has studied waitress unions, observes that waitresses "are responding to hungers of many kinds." This emotional field has economic consequences. The very meaning of service is defined within it. To understand and appreciate more fully the thought behind waitressing, therefore, we need to ponder the many layers of what "service" means in the waitress-customer encounter.

To begin with, this encounter calls forth historically shaped conventions for the serving of food that are associated with the house servant. In Frances Donovan's 1920 account of waitressing, *The Woman Who Waits*, published during the first stage of the feminization of food service, there is explicit treatment of the association of maid and waitress—and of the waitress's desire to distinguish her work from that of a housemaid. But the association remained (my mother's uniforms, down to the modified caps, resembled stereotyped maid's apparel) and is reflected in a number of routines of service: from modes of address, to the sequence of questions about the order, to customs for serving and clearing food. ("[D]ishes are placed on the table without noise," notes a 1932 educational tract on waitressing, ". . . the hand must be trained to slip dishes into place very close to the table rather than bring them down directly from a height.") Conventions and symbols change over time, and vary by the type of restaurant, but waitressing continues to involve the acquisition of customs of service—and one's accommodation

to them. The residue of the servant's role rankles the women I spoke with, and they resist it in a number of ways: from covert criticism and ridicule of haughty behavior (my mother's typical response) to direct rebuke and declaration of status, letting customers know when they've crossed the line. One means by which the waitress expresses agency is through her use of skill and strategy to regulate the flow of work. "The customer has the illusion that they're in charge," observes one of the waitresses I interviewed, "but they're not." It's the waitress who must "get command of her tables," who is "the commander in chief of her section." This waitress still performs the customs of service, but within routines of practice that she controls.

The encounter between customer and waitress potentially gives rise to a further range of emotions and social scripts, in addition to that of server and served. On any given shift, a stream of customers enters with needs that vary from the physiological—and the emotions that attend hunger—to the desire for public intimacy. And the waitress, depending on the type of restaurant, her reading of the situation, and her own history and motives, may fulfill, modulate, or limit those needs and desires. There has been a fair amount of sociological study of the emotional dimension of waitressing and similar occupations, and this research tends toward two broad-scale findings.

The first is that providing service requires "emotion management" or what sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild has termed "emotional labor." Regardless of what the waitress actually feels, the interaction with the customer requires that she display emotion that is dictated by the social and economic demands of the restaurant. My mother illustrates such emotional labor through her account of a churlish regular, a man who was always sending his steak back to the cook: "You've got to make an effort to try and please him, even though you can just kill him." Generalizing to all

difficult customers, she advises: "Just try the best you can to be nice to them. Even if they're rude to you, you still smile and just go on, because that's your living."

The second finding is that the roles afforded to the waitress in her encounter with the customer play out within stereotypic gender scripts: the waitress becomes servant, mother, daughter, friend, or sexual object. The house uniform and policy, customs of service, and other restaurant traditions contribute to this construction of gender-in-the-moment, as do broader expectations from the culture at large. Though I surely wouldn't have understood her behavior in these terms, I recall the sense I had watching my mother work that she smiled and laughed more than when at home, a quick, not-quite-true laugh, flirtatious, with a touch on the arm or shoulder, a focused vivacity. As she summed it all up while we were sitting at her table, "You've got to be damned good, damned fast, and you've got to make people like you."

The social dynamics of the service encounter affect the tip, a critical economic consideration, given that the base pay in most restaurants is terribly low. The wage structure forces a reliance on gratuity, so the successful waitress soon learns how to play the dynamics to maximize her income. There is actually a fair-sized social-psychological literature on the factors that influence tipping. The shrewd waitress, for example, suggests items—appetizers, desserts, more drinks—that will increase the bill, and thus the size of her potential tip. She can also increase her tip by smiling, by touching the customer on the hand or shoulder, or by squatting or kneeling to get closer to eye level. This literature parses out the social skills and gestures learned in the context of restaurant work, the devices that can increase the amount of money customers leave on the table.

The reward is an economic one, but it is also one fraught with symbolism—at the least, a reminder of servant status—so the



reward structure includes emotional factors as well. Customers, Lin Rolens observes, "tip in every spirit imaginable," from a display of status, to an expression of gratitude, to an overture of friendship, to a sexualized gesture. My mother and the waitresses I interviewed and read about express a wide range of feeling about tipping. There's eager anticipation ("You're thinking, 'Oh boy, I'm gonna hurry up and clear that table off . . . because that's a good tipper' ") and satisfaction ("It's fun to have a good night . . . all that cash in your pocket . . . it's a very immediate reward"). There's anger: "Something that really pisses me off is when people stiff the waitress because something happened in the kitchen." And there's a sense of injustice leading to action. Anthropologist Greta Pauff Paules writes of a waitress who "followed two male customers out of a restaurant calling, 'Excuse me! You forgot this!' and holding up the coins they had left as a tip."

Though this field of customer-waitress emotion is shaped by the historical residue of servitude and by stereotyped gender roles, the waitress attempts to control it to her economic and emotional advantage. She does this by the way she defines the situation, by her manipulation of role and routine ("[P]lay the people and the tips will follow," says one waitress interviewed by Lin Rolens), and by judgments that enable her to attribute a low tip to a customer's personal situation, character, or ignorance. These judgments and attributions are part of the restaurant's folk wisdom, played out continually in the talk among waitresses that customers don't hear.

The service encounter provides the tips that enable the waitress to make a living, but in concert with the financial need, other needs of hers, depending on the waitress, can be met as well. Some waitresses gain satisfaction from contributing to a customer's enjoyment: "You supply nurturing and sustenance, the things that make life pleasurable." Some respond to the hustle and stimulation of a

busy restaurant, the sense of being in the middle of things. (This was a big one for my mother, and its loss has been difficult for her.) Some like the attention ("the spotlight's on you") and the safe flirtation. Some comment on the pleasure of the brief human interaction: "Though we'll never get to know each other, there's a really nice feeling that goes back and forth." Some waitresses comment on the feeling of independence the job affords; anthropologist Paules characterizes the waitress as a private entrepreneur. And some gain satisfaction from the display of their skill ("I get to show off my memory") and, as we saw, gain a feeling of competence by performing the job well.

Though perhaps obvious, it is worth stating that this array of feeling—like the cognitive processes detailed earlier—is situated in the restaurant; the various feelings are legitimized and shaped by the waitress-customer association. My mother developed a number of friendly relations with her regular clientele. But when I asked her to perform a thought experiment and imagine how those relationships might have changed if tipping were outlawed, she gave sharp expression to the situational nature of the restaurant friendship. "If you know they're gonna tip you, well, then you talk about your flowers, or you have a son, or you have a daughter, or whatever. But if you know they're not gonna tip, you'd be disinterested." My mother got to know some of her regulars pretty well, would talk about their problems at home, worry over them, yet, at heart, the connection to their lives was restaurant-based, for everyone involved.

Waitress-customer interaction, then, is shaped by history and gender. It involves a good deal of economically motivated emotion management and interpersonal manipulation, all centered around the tip, which, itself, is laden with symbolism and feeling. The waitress-customer encounter also provides the occasion for the

fulfillment of other needs that are not directly economic, though that fulfillment is embedded in an economic context and defined and bounded by life in the restaurant.

As I talk to my mother and to other waitresses, I'm struck by the way cognitive processes and emotional dynamics are interwoven. Memory, for example, draws on emotional material to aid in storage and recall. Customs of service and social display incorporate the cognitive, certainly in one's reading of people, one's social savvy, and one's folk knowledge of the ways of the restaurant, but also in the very particulars of routine that create the experience of service. One waitress comments on her ability to recall little details about her regulars' typical orders—that they don't like pepper or they like extra horseradish—and, as well, comments on her vigilance: "Attention to detail . . . keeping water glasses full, keeping extra stuff off the table, just the little things that make it a more pleasant sensory experience . . . that's why I like it so much . . . that I'm a contributing factor in somebody having a good meal." Memory, attention, the creation of service, and a waitress's personal satisfaction are all of a piece in the busy restaurant.

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The interview for the day is completed; I turn off the tape recorder and gather up my notes. My mother rearranges a few things—paper napkins, salt and pepper shakers, some letters—on the cluttered table. "You know," she muses, folding the napkins, "you learn a lot as a waitress. You work like hell. But you learn a lot." There's a small television set to the side, by the wall, propped up for her by my stepfather. She reaches over and turns it on, clicking through the channels: a rerun of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, a basketball game ("blah"), a base-thumping Ironman competition ("Boy, I couldn't do that"), a PBS documentary on the building of some huge suspension bridge. Is it the Brooklyn Bridge? She stops at

this. There are historical photographs of workers—excavating, welding, a remarkable shot of four men sitting in a net of cables high in the air. The men look southern European, possibly Greek or Italian, like so many of the men in the old photographs I have of Altoona. "This is interesting," she says, "they should show more things like this." She keeps watching, and we talk over the images about work and those immigrants of my grandfather's generation.

Her work in the restaurant business—and physical work in general—meant many things to my mother, and even though she is now infirm, work continues to shape her memory and desire, influence her values and identity.

Many of our depictions of physical and service work—popular accounts but more than a few scholarly treatments as well—tend toward the one-dimensional. Work is seen as ennobling or dehumanizing; it is the occasion for opportunity or exploitation; it functions as an arena for identity development or class consciousness. Work is considered in terms of organizational structure or production systems; or of statistical indicators of occupational and employment trends. To be sure, each focus can have its analytical benefit. But one of the things the writing of this book has made clear to me is how difficult it is—given our standard "story lines" for work and the constraints of our disciplinary lenses—to capture the complex meaning work has in the lives of people like Rose Emily Rose. Let me try to tease out the layers of significance restaurant work had for her. They are interrelated, at times contradictory, of a piece in her experience of waitressing.

Through waitressing, my mother generated income, supported a family, kept poverty at bay. The income was low and variable, but, as she saw it, given her limited education and her early work history, she couldn't make better money elsewhere. Also, her income was somewhat under her control: by the hours she was willing to work and the effort she put forth, she could increase her tips.

Though economically dependent on the generosity of others, she had developed, and could continue to develop, the physical, mental, and social skills to influence that generosity.

My mother's work was physically punishing, particularly over the long haul. She pushed herself to exhaustion; her feet were a wreck; her legs increasingly varicose; her fingers and spine, in later years, arthritic.

The work required that she tolerate rude behavior and insult, smile when hurt or angry. Though she did not see herself as a servant, she was economically beholden to others, and, in some ways—particularly in public display—had to be emotionally subservient. Yet, although she certainly could feel the sting of insult, my mother also saw "meanness" and "ignorance" as part of the work, and that provided for her a degree of emotional distance. The rude or demanding customer could be observed, interpreted, described to peers, quietly cursed—and could be manipulated to financial advantage. Explaining how she would be nice to a troublesome customer, she adds: "And, then, what happens is he becomes your customer! Even though there are other tables that are empty, he'll wait for your booth."

Work for my mother was a highly individualistic enterprise, to be coveted and protected. She would coordinate effort in the moment with busboys and waitresses in adjoining sections. And she made several good friends at work; they would visit our house and provided a sympathetic ear for restaurant complaints. But much of my mother's interaction with other waitresses—both by my recollection and by her interviews—was competitive. Though she considered Norm's "a good restaurant," I can't recall any expression of attachment to the company; and though much of the time she worked in Los Angeles was a period of union activity, my mother was barely involved in her local. I realize now how isolated she must have felt: thousands of miles from family; responsible for a

sick husband and a child; vigilant for incursions, even treachery, from coworkers; not connected to a union or to any civic, social, or church group. And, given her coming-of-age in the Depression and the later waning of the Pennsylvania Railroad, she was always worried about the security of her employment. My mother possessed a strong, if desperate, sense of self-reliance and an in-hers-bones belief in the value of hard work that mixed inextricably with a fear that work would disappear.

A restaurant owner I know told me that the business "attracts people who want to step outside of their own lives. There aren't many professions that require you to stay so focused. You don't have time to think about anything else, and that gives you a rush, and you make money." Who knows to what degree this observation holds true across the restaurant population, but it resonates with a theme in my mother's interviews. I asked her, for example, if there was any reason, beyond the economic one, to want a full house. "When we're busy," she answered, "the time goes so fast. You're so tired, but it's better to be real busy than not busy, because then you'll have time on your hands, you'll have an idle mind." This is a somewhat different expression of the flow experience mentioned earlier. I suspect that the strongest protection my mother had against her pressing fear of destitution was to be consumed on the restaurant floor, attentive to cues from the environment, executing routines, her mind filled with orders, working at peak performance, the tips appearing and appearing by the empty plates, scattered between cups and glasses.

Waitressing enabled my mother "to be among the public." This phrase carried a certain pride for her, as it reflected a social facility that the once-shy girl had to develop. The work provided the opportunity for a low-responsibility social exchange—"I like that part. I like to be with people, associated with people"—that must have been pleasant for someone with so many cares at home. (This



casual sociability has traditionally been more afforded to male occupational roles.) To be among the public was also a sign of attainment: it was **not** the kind of solitary labor she had known as a girl, and it brought her into contact with a range of people whose occupations she admired. There's paradox here, but the logic goes like this: yes, you are serving the doctor or the businessman, but it's your ability that makes everything work right; you are instrumental in creating their satisfaction. As she is fond of saying, not everyone can do that.

The restaurant, then, provided the setting for Rose to display a well-developed set of physical, social, and cognitive skills. It was her arena of competence. Balancing all those plates on your right arm and carrying two cups of coffee in your left hand "is damned hard to do." Remembering your orders during rush hour and getting them served "gives you a feeling of satisfaction."

And the restaurant provided a context for other kinds of learning. Educational researchers are increasingly studying learning in nonschool settings—workplace programs, social and civic clubs—but still very much unexplored is the learning that occurs in everyday, informal social exchange. Given the restrictions of my mother's formal education, her personal predilections (she did not, for example, read for pleasure), and all the demands on her life, she had limited time and means to gain information and learn new things. Yet, to this day, she possesses an alert curiosity. The educational medium available to her was the exchange with her customers, **regulars** particularly. ("How else can I learn about people?" asks Dolores Dante, the waitress Studs Terkel interviewed for *Working*. "How else does the world come to me?") Through the waitress-customer interaction, she acquired knowledge about a range of everyday activities—gardening, cooking, home remedies—and, as well, fed a curiosity that my mother had for as long as I can remember for topics related to medicine, psychology, and human

relations: "There isn't a day that goes by in the restaurant that you don't learn something." Some of what she learned was a fact or a procedure (for example, on planting roses), and some was more experiential and relational. The restaurant became a kind of informal laboratory for her to observe behavior and think through questions of human motivation. This aspect of waitressing engaged her; "you learn a lot, and it interests me."

Waitressing contributed to the development of my mother's identity. In that 1920 account of waitressing mentioned earlier, Frances Donovan bears witness to the social transformations involving young women from the farm and from urban working-class and immigrant backgrounds, women seeking pathways out of "the restraints put upon [them] by the members of the group from which [they] came." Given the recent studies of waitressing as an occupation embodying stereotyped gender roles, it's interesting to note that historically the work provided the occasion for a certain liberation from constraint and an opportunity for a working-class woman to, as Donovan put it, "set up new standards for herself." Approximately two decades later, my mother would enter the restaurant business, and, for all its hardships, it enabled her to begin to think of herself in a different way, to become relatively independent, to develop a set of skills, and to engage a wider social field than would have been possible in her mother's house or in the surrounding immigrant Italian community.

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Talking with my mother about waitressing, and letting that talk generate talk with others, younger, of a different era, getting a sense of the history and sweep of the work, provides for me an opportunity to more fully appreciate the hard but meaningful working life my mother created out of terrible circumstances.

As I leave the kitchen table, to return again—these days, this is

where my mother and I most often talk—one thought, then another begin taking shape and will play out as I go back to notes from other settings, other observations. I'm struck by the fact that particular kinds of work can be defined and perceived in ways that mask the range of human abilities that make the work possible. And I'm struck by the intelligence manifest in making choices within constraint. And I'm struck, quite struck, by the way we try to shape our lives and gain a little control by the work we do.



## STYLING HAIR

Vanessa works in a trendy salon but also cuts hair in her apartment—for a few friends and friends of friends. Her client Lynn sits in a small barber's chair by the window, the place where you'd imagine a breakfast table, a mirror leaning against the wall in front of her. On the floor by the mirror there is a small bowl for Vanessa's dog and a vase with three yellow flowers. Vanessa stands behind Lynn, asking her questions about her hair, chitchatting a little. She keeps her eyes on Lynn's hair as she moves her fingers through it, lifting up, then pulling down one section, then another, then gesturing with her hands around the hair, indicating shape and movement. "How did you like the last haircut?" she asks. How did it handle? Was it easy to manage? What's bugging you now? Does it feel heavy up front? Lynn answers these questions, describing what she wants, relying on adjectives that have more to do with feeling than shape. She wants the cut "freshened," wants it "sassy."

A pair of scissors, a comb, and a round hand mirror sit on the stove, to Vanessa's side. She reaches for the scissors and begins. She starts at the crown and moves around Lynn's head, picking a strand of hair, pulling it down gently along Lynn's face, eyeballing it, then elevating it, cutting into it, "point cutting," she calls it, not a "blunt" cut, her scissors angling into the hair, layering it, "giving it a softer look."

Vanessa likes to cut hair dry—at least hair like Lynn's, baby-fine, short—because she "can see what it's doing immediately . . . where